

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on January 4, 1995



CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Valerie B. Jarrett, Commissioner



The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The Commission makes its recommendation to the City Council only after careful consideration. The process begins with an extensive staff study, summarized in this report, which discusses the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark.

The next step—a preliminary determination by the Commission that the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration—is important because it places the review of building permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission during the remainder of the designation process.

This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the Commission's recommendation to the City Council should be regarded as final.

COVER: A page from a 1929 Northwestern Terra Cotta Company brochure, showing details from the Laramie State Bank Building. The company was responsible for the sculptured panels that decorate the facade.
TOP: The Laramie State Bank Building as it appears today.

Laramie State Bank Building

(later known as
Citizens National Bank)
5200 W. Chicago Ave.

Date: 1927-29

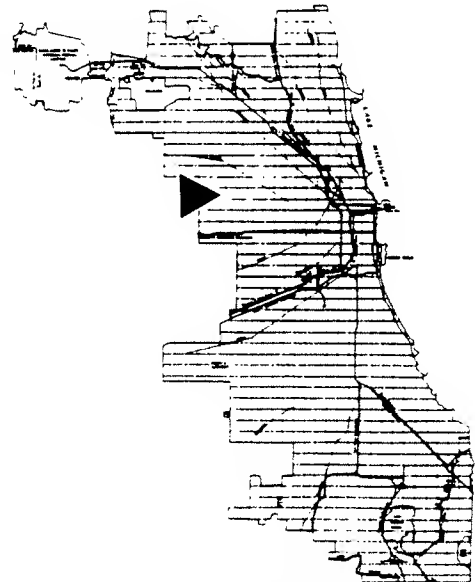
Architect: Meyer and Cook

Ornament: Northwestern Terra Cotta Co.

The Laramie State Bank Building is a radical departure from the usual staid, stone-fronted bank architecture. Although keeping traditional columns and porticos, Laramie is sheathed with flamboyant, colored terra cotta in the Art Deco style.

The building is a prime example of how, in the competitive consumer economy of the 1920s, architecture became advertising. Its motifs vividly assert America's dreams of wealth and abundance. Men hoist sacks of money and sheaves of wheat; prosperous families gather around baskets brimming with fruit; the rarest and most valuable coins cascade down columns; squirrels hoard nuts; and the American eagle commands the globe. In both style and substance, it attracted its clients with visions of the rewards of industry and savings.

While its arresting appearance alone distinguishes the Laramie State Bank from most other banks, it also represents a pinnacle in the technical and artistic achievement of the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company. Following the 1925 *Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, which gave the world the new decorative style of Art Deco, the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company hired a number of the prize-winning sculptors from the exposition and brought them to Chicago as



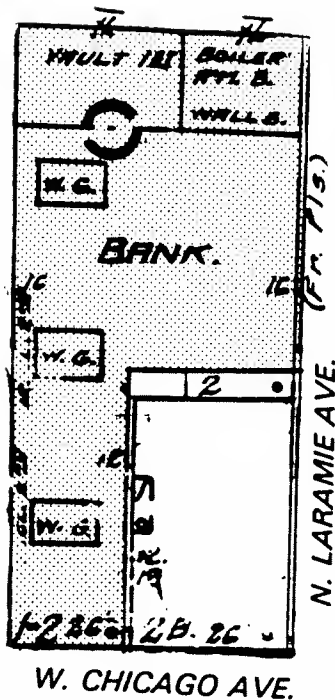
Locator Map

modelers. Laramie State Bank is a beneficiary of this investment in French craftsmanship.

The Roaring Twenties and a Heyday for Austin

Laramie State Bank is located in the Austin neighborhood, seven miles due west of the Loop, at the edge of the Chicago. Founded in 1866, Austin began as a modest village, but had become an exclusive residential suburb by the 1880s. It was annexed to the City of Chicago in 1899. The neighborhood boomed in the decade of the 1920s, increasing in population by 75 percent and seeing most of its vacant land built on. Strong commercial districts along Chicago and Madison avenues anchored the community.

Carl A. Mueller, an area banker, rode the crest of this boom. In 1922, he acquired a two-story commercial/residential building on the northwest corner of Laramie and Chicago avenues, as well as a vacant lot to the west, from James Ruzika who had operated a drugstore there since 1909. By 1924, Mueller had constructed a large L-shaped building around the existing store building which became the home for his newly formed Laramie State Bank.

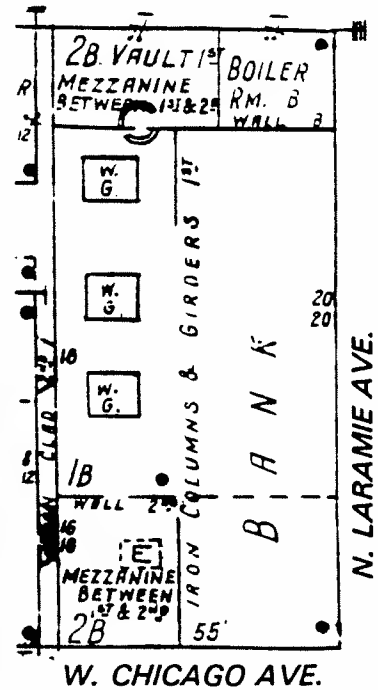


The original facade of the Laramie Bank (right) which was removed in 1928, faced Chicago Avenue, west of its intersection with Laramie. The building's original size is indicated by the shaded area.



Within three years of its opening, the bank was ready to expand. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* (May 1, 1927) announced plans for a new structure, which called for the demolition of the corner drug store, and a large addition to the 1924 building. With the addition, the bank would cover the full parcel. By doing so, the new building would command a prominent corner with major facades along both Chicago and Laramie avenues.

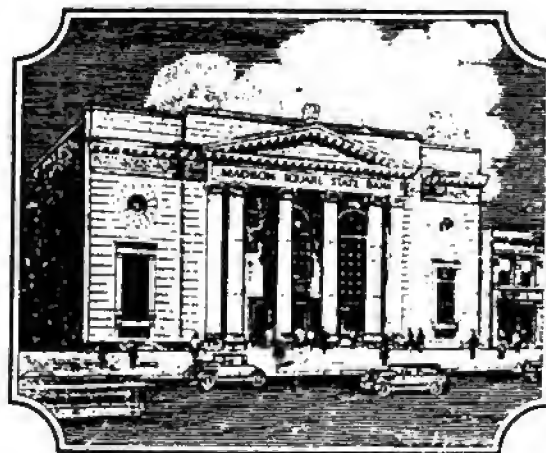
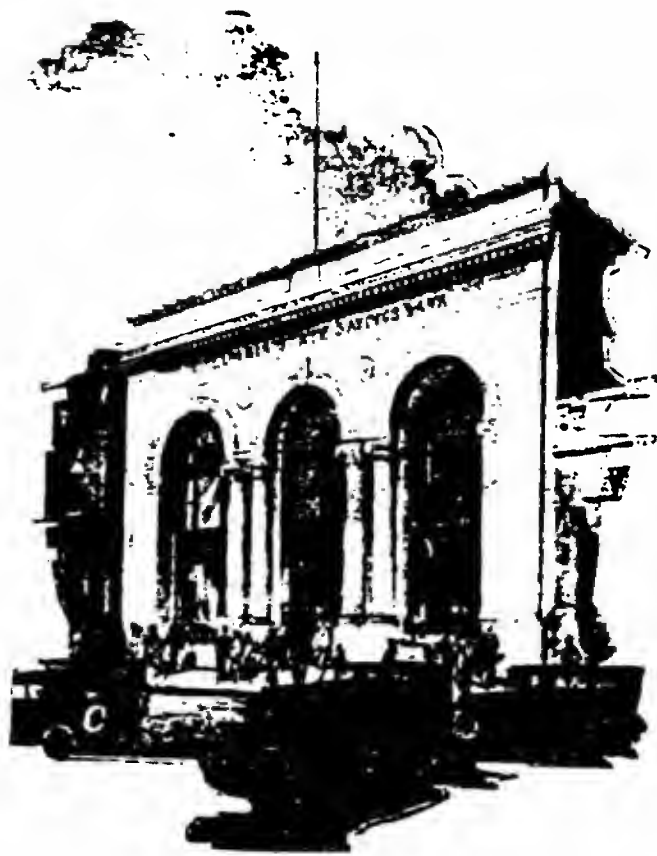
The result was the monumental, three-story Laramie State Bank Building with multifaceted, gleaming terra-cotta surfaces colored in celery green, mustard yellow, and cream. An elaborate cornice, now removed, once crowned the building. Eye-catching during the day, the building was dazzling at night due to floodlighting. This building dominated the commercial district, which was composed primarily of two- and three-story buildings constructed during the teens and the '20s. This wave of success, however, was close to the shoals of the Great Depression. After only eight years of operation, the bank closed on August 16, 1930. Citizens National Bank, another neighborhood bank took over the building in 1946 and continued there until 1991. The building now houses a retail operation.



By 1928, the bank had expanded to fill the entire corner site with a large three-story building ornamented with colorful terra cotta (above). This 1929 view (left) shows the building with its illuminated cornice.



During the 1920s, the establishment of outlying banks played an important role in bolstering the development of Chicago's neighborhoods. Most of those in the Austin area were designed in a classical style, as shown by these examples.



Breaking the Mold of Bank Architecture

Banks, like churches and courthouses, are often among the most distinctive buildings in a community. Typically, however, their designs stay within a very conservative style that projects their role as quasi-civic institutions. They generally rely on a standard architectural vocabulary, such as Colonial (derived from English Georgian) or the classical revival (based on ancient Greek and Roman architecture). As with government buildings, these styles are chosen to convey an image of permanence and stability -- buildings which have always been there and always will remain.

Art Deco, on the other hand, was a self-consciously modernistic style of architecture. The 1925 Paris Exposition both popularized the style and the term, which from its inception was popular among businessmen for commercial architecture. Its stylized designs, both figurative and floral, were immediately comprehensible and appealing to a large, general public. By combining these images with architecture, buildings became useful tools in attracting the public's attention. It allowed a type of corporate exhibitionism.

Paul Gapp, the late *Chicago Tribune* architectural critic, noted that Art Deco "gave the United States its most joyful, celebrative, ebullient, effervescent architecture of the twentieth century." These are adjectives rarely associated with banking. How a neighborhood bank should come to demonstrate this particular artistic movement is not documented. And there are few clues to solve that mystery.

We know that the bank directors did not start out to create, in Gilbert & Sullivan's words, "the most modern of modern banks." Their original intent was quite the opposite. In reporting on the bank expansion in 1927, a year before construction, the *Chicago Tribune* specifically notes that "the architecture of the completed building will be the simple classical kind favored by banking houses." A rendering accompanying the *Tribune* article showed a classical style design.



Like traditional banks, Laramie uses monumental columns at its main entrance, but they are executed in the fashionable Art Deco style of the 1920s.

Dramatic images of abundance and prosperity, in the form of a deluge of coins and men minting money, are rendered in bright ochre, cream-white, and gray-green terra cotta on the columns of the Laramie State Bank Building.



Likewise, its interior belies the building's radical facade. Once through the doors, Laramie projects a more traditional image. The large banking room, with coffered ceiling, chandelier lighting, wood accents, and a massive vault (all of which still exist today), are well within the conventions which the *Tribune* referred to as those "favored by banking houses." Furthermore, none of the Art Deco advertising motifs of the exterior are repeated on the interior.

A review of the work of the building's architects, Meyer and Cook, also does not solve the mystery. Commercial innovation was not part of its design legacy. The firm, whose offices during this period were at 820 N. Michigan Ave. (formerly Tower Court), was a solid but not an award-winning firm. Frederick H. Meyer was first licensed as an architect in 1915; his partner Norman W. Cook in 1916.

The major characteristic of the firm's work is their competency in designing in almost any of the prevailing styles. The Kropps Forge office building in suburban Cicero is Georgian Revival (1918). A River Forest house was executed in the Spanish Renaissance style (1925); Little Flower Roman Catholic Church (now St. Therese of the Infant Jesus) on Chicago's South Side (1931) is derived from the Romanesque, and St. Adrian's Church (1929-30, now demolished) was Tudor Gothic.



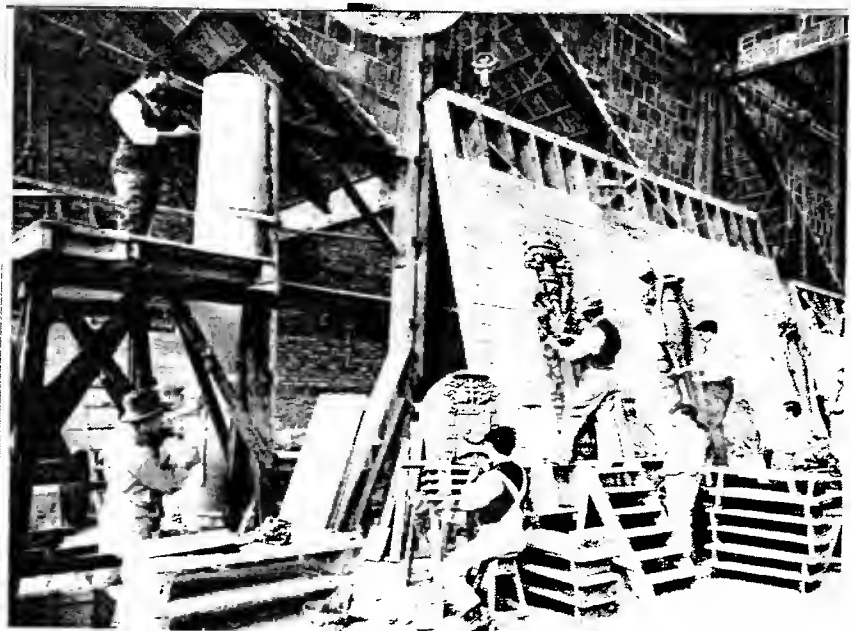
Unlike its exterior, the building's interior is a more traditional bank lobby, as shown here in a 1991 photo.

The best clue we have to the origins of the unique character of Laramie Bank actually may be the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company's methods of promoting the use of terra cotta among architects and its role in introducing the Art Deco style to North America.

**A Solid German Company
Embraces a Trendy French Design**

By the 1920s, Chicago's terra cotta industry had five decades of growth, both in size and technological sophistication. The industry started in the 1870s and expanded rapidly during the 1880s in response to the demand for a light-weight, fire-resistant material with which to clad the new steel-frame highrises that were springing up in the Loop. It was a phenomenally innovative industry, one that constantly experimented with new clays, new furnaces and new processes for making wider ranges of colors and glazes.

Initially, developers and architects favored shades of buff-and brick-colored red terra cotta that imitated stone and other standard materials. But the industry and its designers quickly realized



The modeling shop at the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company in 1912.

the artistic freedom that the material provided. New glazes allowed buildings to be clad in whites or creams, like the finest marble, or even pure gold. Likewise, there was no reason that this brick-like material had to look like bricks. Entire facades could be moulded into sculptures, even to the point of birds taking wing or roadsters speeding from the facade.

The leader in this industry was the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company. Incorporated in 1877, it had become the nation's largest company of its kind by 1927. It was by far the most technologically advanced of the terra cotta firms, developing new moulding and firing techniques that allowed for more intricate and cost-effective sculpture. And, most importantly, it created new glazes for a broader range of color and new surface treatments to enhance the effects of light bouncing off the building surfaces. All of these technological tricks of the trade can be seen in the facade of the Laramie State Bank Building.

Northwestern Terra Cotta was primarily known for work commissioned for specific buildings, rather than stock pieces that were prefabricated. The firm's success, in part, was due to its aggressive work with architects. Often the final building was a collaboration between the architects and the modelers (sculptors) from Northwestern. A prime example of this collaboration was the Reebe Storage and Moving Company Building (1923) at 2325 N. Clark, which resulted as much from Northwestern artist Fritz Albert's knowledge and interest in the discovery of King Tut's Tomb as from the architect George Kingsley's design of the building.

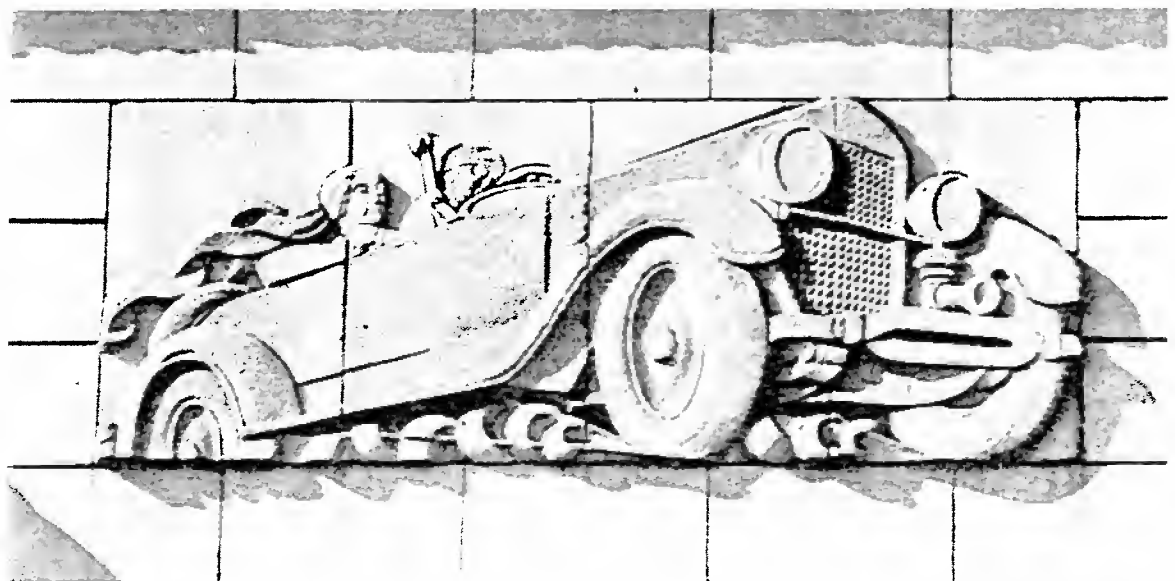
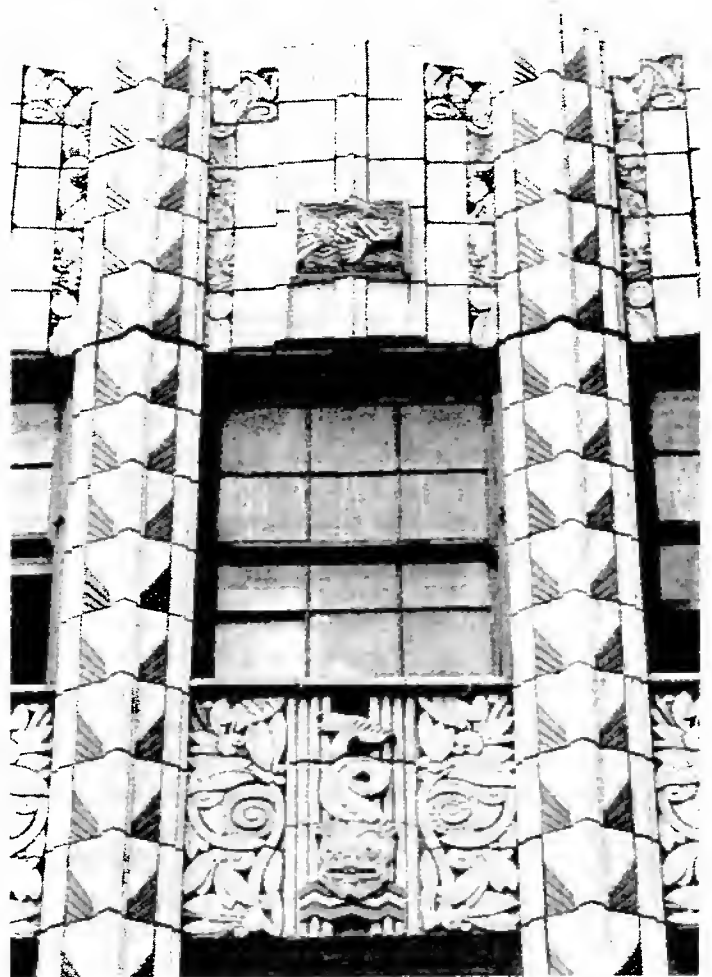
Northwestern Terra Cotta was always looking for new product lines and designs to enhance its business. When the 1925 Paris Exposition gave the world a new decorative style, Art Deco, Northwestern also saw a commercial opportunity. It hired six of the prize-winning sculptors from that exposition, including a twin gold-medal winner -- Edouard Chassaing, to create new designs for the company.

There are reports that these hirings caused great consternation among the firm's longtime



The variety of colorful Egyptian motifs on the Reebe Building on North Clark St. represents one example in which Northwestern Terra Cotta Co.'s work had an impact on the architectural design of the building.

The L. Fish Furniture Company Building (right) at 3322 W. Lawrence Ave. (1930) and the former Hyde Park Chevrolet showroom (below) at 55th St. and Lake Park Ave. (1929-32) illustrate how the flamboyant Art Deco designs of Northwestern's modelers contributed to the architecture of Chicago.



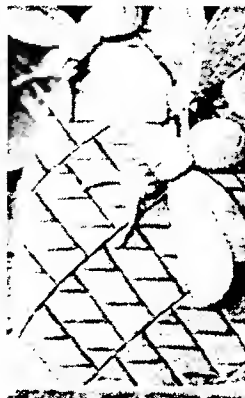
sculptors and modelers, since Northwestern had long been a preferred employer for German-born artisans seeking employment in the United States. But with grumbling or not, the young Parisian star, Chassaing, and his colleagues captured a major role for the firm in introducing the modern designs to America.

Suddenly, architectural firms with little experience with decorative styles were producing highly ornamented Art Deco buildings. McNally and Quinn's (1928) Fullerton Parkway Tower apartments at Clark and Fullerton and M. Louis Kroman's (1929-32) Hyde Park Chevrolet showroom at Lake Park and 55th are excellent examples of buildings in which the Art Deco modelers from Northwestern Terra Cotta took the lead in developing the facade designs. The Laramie State Bank Building is clearly part of this heritage.

While there are no records of the design process or who actually sculpted the panels for the Laramie building, Northwestern was clearly very proud of the results. It presented the Laramie Bank as its premier model of Art Deco design in a special folio that it issued to potential clients in 1929 (see cover and inside back cover of this report).

One can only speculate, but Northwestern Terra Cotta's great salesmanship and collaboration with architects may be the most significant factor in giving the Laramie State Bank Building its unique and historic character for the Austin neighborhood. But whoever was responsible, the building stands on its own as a premier example of an architectural period and style -- Art Deco at its most lavish.

Often pictured in books on the style, Laramie State Bank stands up to the extravagant architecture of the period's movie palaces to which we are more accustomed. The fact that it challenged traditional neighborhood bank design makes it all the more remarkable.



Squirrels, bees, and an owl, all connoting industry and thrift, decorate the Laramie State Bank Building.

APPENDICES

Criteria for Designation

Designation of the Laramie State Bank Building as a Chicago Landmark is recommended because the building meets three of the criteria for landmark designation as set forth in Section 2-210-620 of the Chicago Municipal Code.

CRITERION 1

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

As a premier example of the work of the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, the Laramie State Bank Building has value as part of the economic heritage of Chicago. By the 1920s, Chicago's terra cotta industry had five decades of growth in both size and sophistication. By 1927, Northwestern Terra Cotta had become the nation's largest and most technologically advanced producer of terra cotta. Always looking for new product lines and designs to enhance its business, Northwestern imported noted sculptors from the 1925 Paris *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, which gave the world the new decorative style of Art Deco.

CRITERION 4

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

The distinctive visual character of the Laramie State Bank Building is the result of two important circumstances in architecture in the 1920s: the emergence of "modern" Art Deco styling and the refinements in terra cotta as a decorative cladding for buildings. These two movements complemented each other and the Chicago-based Northwestern Terra Cotta Company was quick to take advantage. Building on their national reputation for terra cotta manufacturing, they developed designs which epitomize visually the fantastic qualities of the jazz age. The Laramie State Bank Building is among the best examples of Northwestern's work during this era.

CRITERION 5

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The names of the skilled modelers of the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company that sculpted ornament for Chicago's architectural terra cotta industry have largely been forgotten, but their talents live on in the wealth of finely detailed terra-cotta clad buildings that survive across the country. Without knowing precisely the artists and craftsmen who worked on the Laramie Bank Building, landmarks designation is a recognition of the Northwestern Company's artists and craftsmen who transformed ordinary building types into resplendent Art Deco showcases.

Significant Building Features

Based on its evaluation of the Laramie State Bank Building, the staff recommends that all exterior aspects of the building be identified as significant building features.

FACADES

The terra-cotta facades, along Chicago (south elevation) and Laramie (east elevation) avenues, are intact and are the building's most significant features. The major missing feature is the terra-cotta cornice (see photo on page 3); any work on the current roofline should either maintain the current appearance or re-create the original decorative cornice based on thorough documentation of its appearance.

The north and west facades are common brick. Modifications or additions to these facades, provided they would not detract from the appearance of the Chicago and Laramie facades, should be allowed.

WINDOWS AND DOORS

The size of the window and door openings should be maintained. Any modifications to the windows and doors themselves should be in the nature of repairs rather than replacement. If replacements are necessary, they should match



The building's two most significant features are its south and east terra-cotta facades (left). Less important are the two unadorned brick facades: north (top) and west (above).

the detailing and materials of the original windows and doors and their frames.

SIGNS

The bank name was originally rendered in bands of raised letters along the top of the two principal facades (see photo on page 3). This is the preferred method of applied signage to these sections of the facades.

A massive two-story clock and sign for Citizens National Bank, probably installed sometime in the 1960s, currently projects from the corner (see previous page). Its scale is too large for a building of this size, obscuring views of the bank. A smaller sign, at the second-floor level, similar to the size of the original corner clock (see page 3) would be in keeping with the character of the building and enhance the structure's visibility.

Initially, there was an illuminated one-story sign at the north end of the building on Laramie. This sign has been removed, but its support beam is still in place, providing an opportunity for another one-story-tall hanging sign.

The north and west walls could also be used for signs.

INTERIORS

The interior is not a significant feature. Changes should be allowed as long as they do not affect exterior views of the building. For instance, an alteration such as a dropped ceiling, which would obscure windows, would be inappropriate.



The size of the window openings, as well as their materials and multi-pane arrangements, are integral features of the Laramie State Bank Building. At right, a detail of the entrance-way.



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Acknowledgments

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Sources of Illustrations

A.I.A Guide to Chicago

(page 16)

Art Institute of Chicago

(cover, inside back cover, p. 11)

The *Austinite*, various 1920s issues

(pp. 2, 4,)

Chicago Department of Planning and Development

(pp. 5, 6, 7, 15, 16)

Chicago Ceramics and Glass

(p. 9, p. 10 bottom)

Chicago History (Winter 1979-80)

(p. 10 upper right)

Commonwealth Edison *Round Table*

(p. 3)

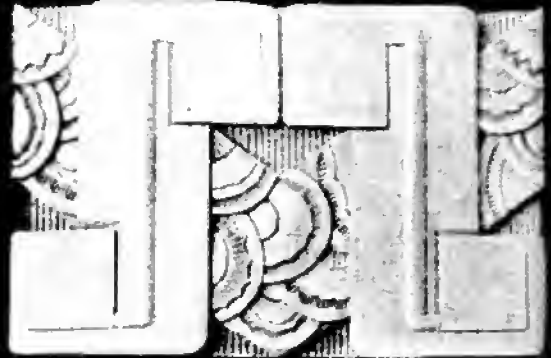
The L.A. Modernism Show Catalogue

(p. 8)

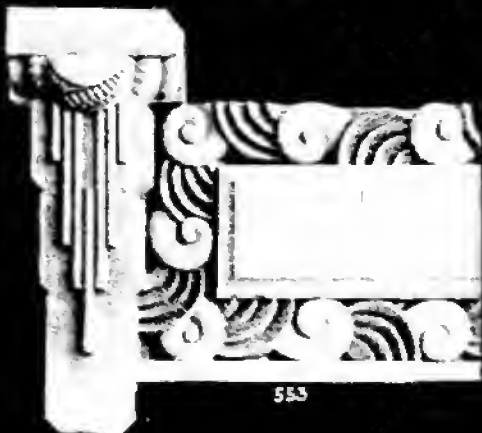
**OPPOSITE: A page from a 1929 Northwestern Terra
Cotta Company brochure advertising some of the firm's
work.**



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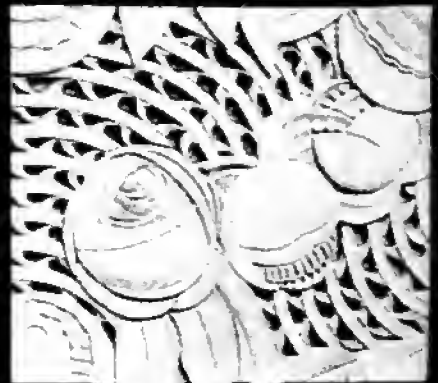
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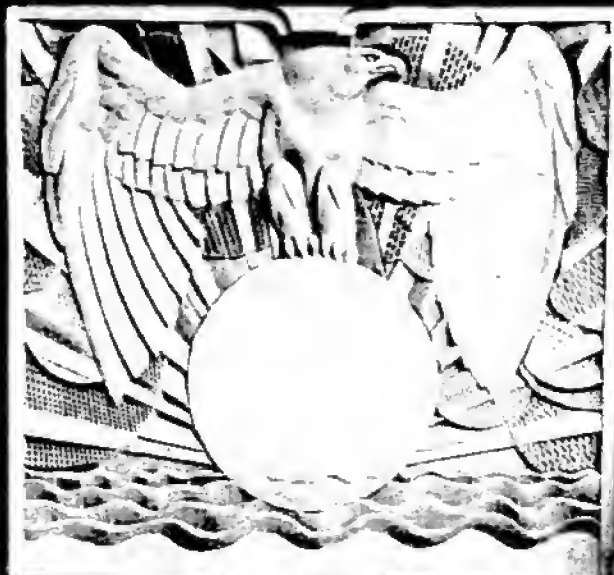
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513



DETAILS OF
LARAMIE
STATE
BANK
CHICAGO



525



Meyer
&
Cook
Architects

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